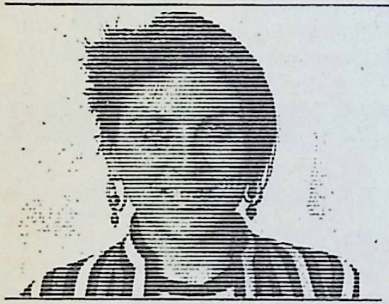
CYBERTHON INK. pls return to KT

DENISE CARUSO

INSIDE TECHNOLOGY



Electronic music that's just D'Cuckoo

THOUGH IT does have its discreet charm, most electronic music, created with digital gear that simulates the sound of traditional instruments, has always had an air of Spockishness about it — somewhat soulless and a bit aloof — likely because it's usually dealing with futuristic, New Age, to-boldly-go themes.

But that was before a band of women called D'Cuckoo began perfecting a sound they call "techno-roots," employing an amazing array of electronic marimbas and drums they designed, with the help of two Silicon Valley engineeers, and built themselves.

The instruments are not what you'd recognize as marimbas and drums, though. They're actually MIDI trigger instruments. MIDI is an electronic musical instrument interface standard that allows devices like music synthesizers and computers to connect and exchange digital "samples" or small chunks, of stored musical data.

When pressing a piano key "triggers" the resonance of the strings, a MIDI "trigger" sends a digital signal to a MIDI device to select a sound sample. So D'Cuckoo's rhythms might or might not sound like drums or marimbas. In one song, striking the marimba triggers the sample of someone singing "oooh baby baby."

This inventiveness, coupled with the fact that all four D'Cuckoo's are professional percussionists with decades of experience among them, makes their music engaging and exciting to watch. And it's grounded in such intensely traditional music that there's not a shred of trendiness in their sound.

Tina Pheles, for example, is a trained Japanese Taiko ritual drummer. **Candice Pacheco,** a 20-year electronic music veteran, is also a seasoned acoustic marimba player. **Tina Blaine** is an ethnomusicologist and African drum expert. And **Patti Clemens,** former Second City comedy trooper, studied and played South African Shona-style marimba for five years.

Three of the four band members performed together in other San Francisco acoustic marimba bands. At one point, "some people wanted to play pop music, too, not just traditional African music," Clemens said.

Around then, in 1987, they saw their first electronic marimba at a music convention. "We said, wouldn't it be cool if the rhythm could be electronic triggers? We would look like an African marimba ensemble, but we could sound like anything," Clemens recalls.

When they realized that prefab marimbas couldn't keep up with their drumming techniques, Pacheco suggested they build their own. At first they were going to rip apart synthesizer keyboards to get the parts, but then Pacheco met Valley engineer **David Reed** at a party. He and co-worker **Bruce Newcombe,** in typical engineer fashion, were fascinated by the problem and took it on. "They'd never seen us play; they'd never even seen a marimba," says Clemens. "But they had us play our mallets on a circuit hooked to an oscilloscope, measuring the velocity and the pressure of our strokes. It was like watching our heartbeat."

The marimbas and drums they built around Reed and Newcombe's circuit boards use piezo crystals (which emit electrical signals when vibrated) as sensors, under neoprene pads.

Since they started playing techno-roots, D'Cuckoo and Aisle of Women, its production company, have been riding a swell of interest. During a gig at the October Cyberthon "virtual reality" event Blaine slipped a D'Cuckoo cassette to **Brian Eno.** He was so taken by their style that he corralled them into a studio to jam with a couple **Neville Brothers** and sample master **Jeff Dean.** The concept? "Broken Down African Industrial Robot Dance Music," or "Juju Space Jazz."

"It was hilarious, incredibly fun," says Clemens. Future projects may include concocting a "virtual" fifth D'Cuckoo, an electronic composite of the foursome's voices and looks by electronic puppet masters degraf and wahrman, though it's hard to imagine a stage that could hold much more energy than D'Cuckoo already commands with its actual physical presence.

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